

Song dynasty philosopher Zhu Xi transformed Confucianism into a systematic philosophy of nature. In this extract Zhu Xi explains the relationship of *qi*, a concept meaning both matter and energy, and *li*, the ordering principle of the universe.

Principle and Material-Force

From The Complete Writings of Zhu Xi

In the universe there has never been any material-force (*qi*) without principle (*li*) or principle without material-force.

Question: Which exists first, principle or material-force?

Answer: Principle has never been separated from material-force. However, principle is above the realm of corporeality whereas material-force is within the realm of corporeality. Hence when spoken of as being above or within the realm of corporeality, is there not a difference of priority and posteriority? Principle has no corporeal form, but material-force is coarse and contains impurities.

Fundamentally principle and material-force cannot be spoken of as prior or posterior. But if we must trace their origin, we are obliged to say that principle is prior. However, principle is not a separate entity. It exists right in material-force. Without material-force, principle would have nothing to adhere to. Material-force consists of the five agents of metal, wood, water, fire, and earth, while principle contains humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom.

Question about the relation between principle and material-force.

Answer: Zheng Yi expressed it very well when he said that principle is one but its manifestations are many. When Heaven, earth, and the myriad things are spoken of together, there is only one principle. As applied to man, however, there is in each individual a particular principle.

Question: What are the evidences that principle is in material-force?

Answer: For example, there is order in the complicated interfusion of the yin and the yang and the five agents. This is [an evidence of] principle [in material-force]. If material-force did not consolidate and integrate, principle would have nothing to attach itself to.

Question: May we say that before Heaven and earth existed there was first of all principle?

Answer: Before Heaven and earth existed, there was certainly only principle. As there is this principle, therefore there are Heaven and earth. If there were no principle, there would also be no Heaven and earth, no man, no things, and in fact, no containing or sustaining [of things by Heaven and earth] to speak of. As there is principle, there is therefore material-force, which operates everywhere and nourishes and develops all things.

Question: Is it principle that nourishes and develops all things?

Answer: As there is this principle, therefore there is this material-force operating, nourishing, and developing. Principle itself has neither corporeal form nor body.

Keji asked: When the creative process disposes of things, is it the end once a thing is gone, or is there a principle by which a thing that is gone may return?

Answer: It is the end once a thing is gone. How can there be material-force that has disintegrated and yet integrates once more?

Question: "The Lord-on-High has conferred even on the inferior people a moral sense." "When Heaven is about to confer a great responsibility on any man." "Heaven, to protect the common people, made for them rulers." "Heaven, in the production of things, is sure to be bountiful to them, according to their qualities." "On the good-doer, the Lord-on-High sends down all blessings, and on the evil-doer, He sends down all miseries." "When Heaven is about to send calamities to the world, it will usually produce abnormal people as a measure of their magnitude." In passages like these, does it mean that there is really a master doing all this up in the blue sky or does it mean that Heaven has no personal consciousness and the passages are merely deductions from principle?

Answer: These passages have the same meaning. It is simply that principle operates this way.

Throughout the universe there are both principle and material-force. Principle refers to the Way [Tao], which is above the realm of corporeality and is the source from which all things are produced. Material-force refers to material objects, which are within the realm of corporeality; it is the instrument by which things are produced. Therefore in the production of man and things, they must be endowed with principle before they have their material force, and they must be endowed with material-force before they have corporeal form.

What are called principle and material-force are certainly two different entities. But considered from the standpoint of things, the two things are merged one with the other and cannot be separated with each in a different place. However, this does not destroy the fact that the two things are each a thing by itself. When considered from the standpoint of principle, before things existed their principles of being had already existed. Only their principles existed, however, but not yet the things themselves.&hellip

There is principle before there can be material-force. But it is only when there is material-force that principle finds a place to settle. This is the process by which all

things are produced, whether large as Heaven and earth or small as ants. Why should we worry that in the creative process of Heaven and earth, endowment may be wanting? Fundamentally, principle cannot be interpreted in the sense of existence or nonexistence. Before Heaven and earth came into being, it already was as it is.

The nature of man and things is nothing but principle and cannot be spoken of in terms of integration and disintegration. That which integrates to produce life and disintegrates to produce death is only material-force, and what we call the spirit, the soul (*hunpo*), and consciousness are all the effects of material-force. Therefore when material-force is integrated, there are these effects. When it is disintegrated, they are no more. As to principle, fundamentally it does not exist or cease to exist because of such integration or disintegration. As there is a certain principle, there is the material-force corresponding to it, and as this material-force integrates in a particular instance, its principle is also endowed in that instance.

Source: William Theodore de Bary et al., eds. *Sources of Chinese Tradition*. Vol. 1. New York: Columbia University Press, 1960.¹

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